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ABSTRACT

Discussion focuses on the widespread alienation of students from the foreign language experience while referring to methodological factors underlying this syndrome and to the uncertainty of the status that foreign language instruction has today in the classroom. A causal relationship is suggested to exist between students' alienation and the impact of the audiolingual method of instruction. Major portions of the paper cover: (1) problem area, (2) definition of the foreign language syndrome, (3) outline of the audiolingual method, (4) contrasting features of the traditional approach, and (5) suggested techniques for meeting course demands. It is hoped that the paper will help the campus counselor in his work with the student. (Author/RL)

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WHAT GUIDANCE COULD BE OFFERED TO THE STUDENT ALIENATED FROM THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE?

by

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Problem Area

This spring the University of California, one of the tone-setting institutions of higher learning, abolished the foreign language requirement as a part of its general education curriculum. In recent years we have observed the status of foreign languages in the college curriculum becoming more and more uncertain, foreign language majors facing increasingly dim future prospects, and students generally showing a marked lack of motivation for learning a foreign language.

The prevalent attitude that students have toward foreign language learning represents both a puzzling and incongruous phenomenon in a society which prides itself on its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural

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plurality, particularly at the time when it is developing closer and wider cooperation with the rest of the modern world.

The background of second language learning is so broad that it may be viewed in a variety of perspectives, ranging from subtle symptoms of an isolationist tendency on the national scale to rather technical analyses of linguistic, psycholinguistic, psychological, and pedagogical nature. In the face of all the intelligence that such investigations could offer us we are in dire need of something beyond, or rather beneath the generalities of conflicting theoretical considerations - if we are to fulfill our role of student counselors. In the first place we need to acquire an understanding of typical difficulties encountered in foreign language learning, and also to develop an insight into the assumptions of the method of instruction employed, to be in the position to offer specific recommendations of procedures and techniques which may be helpful to the student. Accordingly, this paper will be concerned with those aspects of the dominant method of instruction which can be more directly associated with the resulting problems both in learning and motivation. Also, we will suggest some directions for the use of the counselor who must deal with the substance of the unresolved theoretical issues in the pragmatic terms of what can be done here and now to help the student adjust to course demands.

Definition of Foreign Language Syndrome

We start from the assumption that there is a foreign language syndrome on our college campuses. This malady is typically reflected in the patient's frustration with and consequent alienation from the foreign language experience in spite of his possible acceptance of other products and manifestations of the foreign culture itself. If

we are to suggest isolationism as a possible cause for this attitude, we must be able to relate this tendency to the alienation of students from foreign languages. However, today's young generations seem to have a romantic affinity for the unusual, the different, the exotic, and, if I may add, for the "way out" things. Whatever this may mean it certainly must be far removed from the tendency to close in and isolate oneself from the world. Nevertheless, these same young people seem to find their exposure to foreign languages to be singularly deficient when compared to the human interest, more complete involvement, and relevance to their lives that they have been able to find in foreign cultures in other ways.

Obviously, the alienation has grown out of their experience with the study of some foreign language. It is our contention that the nature of this experience is only indirectly related to the particular language -- but directly associated with the method and content of instruction.

Outline of the Audio-Lingual Method

For a number of years the Audio-Lingual (A-L)* method has dominated the classroom at the initial and motivationally crucial stage in second language learning. Therefore, it is in order that some answers are sought to explain the factors which have contributed to such a widespread disenchantment with the foreign language experience.

At the base of the A-L approach are found principles of Skinner's version of behaviorism extended to language (6), combined with linguistic structures, as the content of the target language. Briefly, the part played by linguistics in the A-L approach has been restricted

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* Abbreviated A-L in further text.

to furnishing material which the contrastive analysis has been able to isolate and recommend as being representative structural patterns of that particular language. Skinner proposed that language is a behavior acquired through operant conditioning and, although this theory seems to be rather questionable (1), it offered a simple model of the learning mechanism to the practical minded linguists. They felt that the entire process of language learning can be reduced to systematic "internalization" of linguistic structures, by means of operant conditioning and that these structures were to serve as "patterns" for generation of corresponding utterances. Spolsky (7) summarizes the major assumptions of the A-L method as follows:

1. Foreign language learning is a mechanical process of habit formation.
2. Habits are strengthened by reinforcement.
3. Language is behavior made up of habit sequences at the phonemic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic levels.
4. Repetition, practice, and reinforcement of units and their concatenation are effective ways of developing language performance.

It is immediately apparent that if the initial hypothesis were accepted as correct, namely that verbal behavior is made up of habit sequences only and that language learning is a mechanical process, then it would only take efficiently manipulated mechanical devices in order to accomplish the task of mastery of a foreign language. Accordingly, memorization of dialogues remains the major activity both in classroom and language laboratory, and "structure drill" represents the principal learning device of the method, since it mirrors rather closely the formula of stimulus and response. In order to promote "internalization" of grammatical principles the A-L theoreticians rely heavily on the process of discovery. Although we realize that discovery can

be of considerable value to advanced students, we find that its potential at the initial stages of acquisition of grammatical competence is questionable both because of its excessive demands on classroom time, and because of its frequently frustrating and demoralizing effect on students. It is sufficient to examine a book designed to bring about such a discovery in order to realize how limited is the scope of the potentially deducible grammatical principle, and how little help it offers to the student who is uncertain about his tentative generalization and wishes to be confirmed in his hunch. Since students are not allowed to ask a question in English, they usually retain their confusion on the particular point. In such a case, it would be appropriate to suggest a reference grammar where the student can find the needed statement synthesizing the underlying grammatical relations.

The rationale for dialogue memorization includes: better imitation of sound and intonation pattern of the target language, situational meaningfulness of utterances, and learning of judiciously selected structures. Overlearning of linguistic structures is expected to result in the transfer potential and in easier manipulation of transformation drills, etc. Although these objectives are respectable in themselves, it may be argued that their realization does not necessarily nor automatically follow from dialogue memorization. Let us point out that since translation is not tolerated by the A-L method, the semantic content remains a superficial and the least stressed feature of the new utterance. This is incompatible with the claim of the "situational meaningfulness of utterances". In practice, even if a vague idea of meaning is initially gathered by the student, he is not allowed to verify the same first, but is rushed instead to parrot

the entire chain of utterances with the emphasis on preserving the speed and intonation pattern of the model. In this manner the entire activity turns very easily into a truly mechanical exercise in repetition and the transfer potential of a relatively meaningless string of utterances can obviously be only minimal. It is common knowledge that comprehension of the foreign language exceeds the student's ability for production, particularly at the early stage of language learning. Accordingly, if priority is given to imitation of sound and the meaning is treated as a secondary feature, the student is doubly handicapped first by insistence on his weaker and functionally unmotivated capacity, and second by elimination of a source of motivation that otherwise could be found in the rewarding experience of achievement -- if comprehension were given due priority in the process. In her study of the structure and process in language acquisition, Ervin-Tripp (2) seems to underline the fundamental role of interpretation or comprehension when she points out that children will often respond to the content of the utterance they have been asked to repeat only. In this fashion the meaning inherent in the dialogue situation is minimized by the negative impact that the dull procedure of "memorization drills" has on students' motivation, and by the consequent absence of any degree of identification which is the prerequisite for a fruitful role-playing experience. We must also consider the potential for boredom and revolt contained in the practice of imposed parroting of someone else's remarks and messages -- without the underlying matrix of thought and feeling. The same criticism can be directed against structure drilling owing to the cumulative effects of: 1) gradual diminishing of students' attention, 2) the proportional shrinking of meaning, and 3) the increasing reliance on the mechanical element in

the repetition. Speaking from classroom experience Gefen (3) complains: "Unfortunately, many linguistically-oriented drills are deadly dull and so intent on avoiding the distractions that a meaningful content to the pattern might offer, that the learner sees little or no connection between these boring exercises and that promise of wider cultural horizons or of communicative facility which originally motivated his learning". It is ironical to recall a rather fatigued cliché that advocates of the A-L method have been using to describe a certain "traditional" approach as teaching "about" the language and not the language itself, for it has become more and more apparent that the A-L method teaches "structures" and not the living language either.

Contrasting Features of the "Traditional" Approach

At this point it would be appropriate to briefly contrast the A-L method with the so-called "traditional" approach in second language learning. In the first place this label provides only a vague reference to anything that could be more or less directly opposed to the only "legitimate" positions of the A-L school, and consequently it is said to contain the sum total of "absurd" practices in the light of our "scientific certainties" concerning language learning process. Obviously, the reality of the situation is too complex to be described in oversimplified generalizations. For example, since learning of vocabulary in context is doubtless the most adequate way of dealing with new words, it has been taken for granted that the "traditional" approach in this respect must be guilty of rote memorization of vocabulary lists, on the ground that some old school teachers and textbooks offered such lists in each lesson. The only difficulty with this generalization is that the way the vocabulary items were

manipulated depended exclusively on the competence and teaching ability of each individual teacher -- and not on a prescribed procedure. Nevertheless, if we start from typical strategies prescribed by the A-L method we can identify more closely those points from which the old practice showed most divergence, and try to reduce them to a common denominator. Accordingly the more salient differences are found in: the treatment of grammar, use of translation, and orientation to culture. In short, translation was employed to ensure, verify, and reinforce comprehension. How much this practice involves the tendency toward literal translation is, to say the least, a debatable question. Grammar was taught analytically and prescriptively, which goes to say that students were expected to develop the ability to identify constituents of syntactic structures and to know how and where they may be appropriate. Interestingly enough, these aims are considered to be legitimate and consistent with the function of the "pedagogical grammar" as it is conceived by the generative grammarians of today. (8) The old school approach generally emphasized culture, but it did so in a restricted way to include elements of distant cultural heritage by sampling of classical literature. On the other hand, the A-L programs are hardly in a position to offer satisfactory models in this respect for, although authenticity of the colloquial language in contemporary contexts is emphasized in their textbooks, the substance of dialogues is deplorably narrow and confined to surface phenomena.* Joyaux (4) expresses a balanced criticism of the

*A relatively recent development promising a new outlook on cultural content in foreign language programs is exemplified in the excellent work of Camille Bauer. His "La France Actuelle" and "Panorama de la France Moderne" deal with topics in which a wide spectrum of attitudes, feelings, and beliefs of the French people are revealed as they have evolved from the past, and they are compared and contrasted with the generally held views by Americans, so that development of a cultural perspective is made to be relevant and realistic as well.

extreme positions in his statement that ". . .much was wrong with the situation then (i.e. in the past), for reducing foreign language study to reading and translating is as unfair and as stultifying as reducing it to oral comprehension and speaking ability -- especially when the latter is still further reduced to its least human aspects, the reflex mechanism."

Suggested Techniques for Meeting Course Demands

In accordance with the foregoing, a serious reconsideration of the priority of meaning equivalence in the form of competent translation seems to be indispensable in view of the crucial role played by the semantic elements in the process of overlearning of the new structures. To minimize the possible pitfalls of literal translation in language production, the emphasis must be laid on expressions and cliché-associations among lexical items, which make for the acquisition of sensitivity approximating that of the native speaker. For example, since words differ across languages in respect to their semantic restrictions, it is necessary for the student to learn every new item as it is found in the sentence. Thus a verb requiring a preposition in French but taking a direct object in English will be identified and manipulated accordingly until sufficient overlearning is achieved. Let us add immediately that the use of translation is considered an indispensable aid at the stage of initial learning of particular forms, and that systematic use of the foreign language is to be encouraged as soon as adequate comprehension of the meaning is ensured. Application of newly acquired vocabulary and structures must follow the initial learning so that vocabulary development parallels expansion of linguistic competence.

Since some students will have difficulty in accomplishing the task of dialogue memorization, it would be advisable that they first make certain that each utterance is clearly understood before they attempt to imitate and memorize them. At times, students may find it helpful to replace the names in the dialogue with those of their friends, as well as to substitute names of places with other names and the like, in order to verify their understanding of the meaning. Since language use and the living language are emphasized, it is maintained that meaning is the primary element and the sine qua non of a meaningful practice.

As we have observed earlier there is a problem of rapprochement between students and the foreign language experience today. Possibly, the day is not far in the future when we will give students credit for having rejected an experience which was found to be weightless on their scale of relevance. We cannot help being optimistic, however, because foreign language experience can obviously be a learning experience of great potential, and because more and more enlightened voices are heard calling for the neglected and the missing quality in today's instruction -- the same quality which had earned a place for the foreign language experience in the curriculum of general education initially. Let us define it as the potential that adequate exposure to a foreign culture contains for humanizing the young and for making them fit to live richer and more rewarding lives in a pluralistic world where knowing and understanding the difference makes for meaningful communication -- and, consequently, for true membership in a cosmopolitan society.

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